

## **Protect Yourself!**

*by Jerry Harben, U.S. Army Medical Command and Jean Ha, Public Health Nurse, Department of Preventive Medicine, EACH*

A quick stick in the arm or a spray in the nose OR ... a week of headaches, coughing, sneezing, fever, chicken soup and misery. An easy choice to make.

Influenza (or flu) is a contagious respiratory disease that can have serious, even fatal, effects. Flu is spread through respiratory droplets in the air during close contact with an infected person or animal, or through contact with a contaminated object. It threatens military readiness, with the potential to make many military and their family members very sick.

“Each year 5 to 20 percent of the United States population gets the flu, resulting in about 200,000 people being hospitalized. Vaccination is your best protection against influenza infection,” said Army Lt. Col. Patrick M. Garman, deputy director for scientific affairs at the Department of Defense Military Vaccine Agency.

According to the El Paso County Department of Health and Environment (EPCDHE), flu cases were nearly 400% higher last flu season than the previous year. This represented the highest level of flu activity since 2003-2004. EPCDHE adds that the make-up of the flu vaccine for 2008-2009 has been completely changed from last year, and public health officials are optimistic that the vaccine will be very effective in protecting persons against infection.

“For the 2007-2008 flu year, 81.5% of confirmed flu cases seen at Evans Army Community Hospital (EACH) had no record of a flu vaccine. Not only does getting a flu shot decrease your chances of ending up with the flu, it reduces your chances of contracting severe secondary infections that come along with flu, such as bacterial pneumonia. The flu shot is up to 90% effective in preventing influenza, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC),” said Ms. Lindsay Vernon, Nurse Epidemiologist for the Department of Preventive Medicine at EACH.

Ms. Vernon added, “You cannot get the flu from a flu shot. I know some people swear this



isn't true, but a person can't get sick from an inactivated or dead virus. If a person becomes ill soon after receiving a flu shot, it is usually because he or she was exposed to the flu before the vaccine could take effect. This makes sense, since the time of year we give the flu vaccine is the time of year the virus begins circulating in the community.”

It is very important that children are protected from getting the flu as well. According to the CDC, each year an average of 20,000 children under the age of 5 are hospitalized because of flu complications. The CDC received reports that 86 children died from flu-related complications during last year's flu season. Children with chronic conditions such as Asthma and Diabetes have an increased risk of developing serious complications from the flu.

Public health experts recommend that children ages 6 months to 18 years get vaccinated, along with seniors, individuals with compromised immune systems, pregnant women and health care providers. Active Duty personnel are mandated to receive the flu vaccine. People with sensitivity to eggs or egg products, or those with a history of Guillain-Barre Syndrome should not receive the flu vaccine.

Most people who receive flu vaccine experience no serious problems. Side effects of the injectable vaccine such as soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site, fever, weakness, headache or muscle aches may last one or two days. More serious problems such as severe allergic reactions are rare. Side effects of the intranasal vaccine can include runny nose, headache, fever, cough and sore throat.

In addition to vaccination, experts recommend frequent hand washing and avoiding close contact with people who are sick. Also, people who are sick should avoid others if possible, wash hands often and cover the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing to prevent the virus from spreading.

Fort Carson will hold its annual walk-in Flu Clinic for TRICARE Beneficiaries on 3 November-20 November 2008 at the Special Events Center (Specker Ave. and Prussman Blvd.), 0830-1500, Mondays – Thursdays only. The flu Clinic will also be closed on Tuesday, November 11<sup>th</sup> in observance of Veteran's Day. Extended hours until 1700 will be available on 18-20 November for school aged children. For further information and updates, call the Flu Shot Hotline, (719) 526-6422.

For DOD Civilian employees assigned at Fort Carson, the Occupational Health Clinic will be announcing its flu clinic dates and hours tentatively scheduled beginning the last week of November into the first two weeks of December. Please look for announcements in the post wide e-mail system. Specific dates and times will depend on flu vaccine shipment and supply availability and after the vaccination requirements for hospital employees is completed.

More information about the flu and flu vaccinations is available on the Internet from the Military Vaccine Agency at [www.vaccines.mil/flu](http://www.vaccines.mil/flu) and from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov/flu/protect](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect).

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*To view the 2008 Flu Clinic dates, click [HERE](#).*